Worldwide Opportunities on Organic Farms (WWOOF) as part of the existing care economy in Canada

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Abstract

This review paper discusses the program called Worldwide Opportunities on Organic Farms (WWOOF), in North America, as an example of a subset of the care economy in which volunteers contribute to farm care. Human care is partly direct (some childcare, kitchen duties and other housework), but mostly indirect, in that farm families get time off. This review expands on previous work that considered farms in Ontario, Canada as spaces of care and farmwomen as the carers. It critiques other research that claims WWOOFers do not replace local labor and that WWOOF represents an idealistic and ethical space potentially corrupted by tourists.

Key words: WWOOF, organic farms, volunteers, caring economy

1. Introduction

People involved in organic farming in Canada and in co-operatives are working together to build an alternative economic future based on the values that they share (Cameron and Gibson-Graham, 2003). These values include recognizing a link between healthy food and healthy bodies, environmentally-sound agriculture and fair trade. Buying locally keeps money within the community. Anti-globalization forces and food safety concerns have contributed to the growth of this alternative food economy.

The Vancouver Island organic certifying body, the Islands Organic Producers Association, has the following definition of organic farming:

> It is both a philosophy, and a way of farming. The main focus is maintaining sustainable, productive farms, based on living soil ecosystems. The farmer's role is to use and support a community of organisms, both plant and animal, that maintain and build the soil, minimize predation by unwanted pests and weed plants, and produce healthy, nutritious food for the farm and the consumer. The process is as important as the product and the quality and sustainability of life is paramount (IOPA, 2012).

This definition is similar to that of the Certified Organic Associations of British Columbia (COABC), the administrator of the Organic Regulations under the Agri-Food Choice and Quality Act of British Columbia. In 2012, the agricultural and agri-food sector accounted for 6.7% of Canada's total gross domestic product and employed 2.1 million people (Canada, 2014). The province of Saskatchewan has the largest number of certified farms (1015), followed by Quebec (963), Ontario (685), British Columbia (471) and Alberta (275). In 2012,

British Columbia produced 17.6% of the gross receipts of Canadian organic farming of $906.6 million (Macey, 2013). Total net income in British Columbia was 14.3% of the Canadian total with operating expenses of $133.7 million. Women farmers operate forty percent of organic farms, similar to non-organic farms (38%), with the highest average on Vancouver Island (52%). 21,000 farms support about 1100 food processors employing 54,000 people and generating $2.3 billion in farm cash receipts (Macey, 2013).

2. The Caring Economy

The caring economy has been described as an economy at the service of human beings, not human beings at the service of the economy, where the input is labor and the output is care (Himmelweit, 2007; Eisenstein, 2008). Feminist economics show that caring labour includes both material and social provisioning in the economy and notes that market exchange plays only one part (Hinze, 2011; Nelson, 1995).

Caring labor is central to rather than marginal to economic life, as becomes apparent when it is computed and found to contribute 30 – 45% of Canada's GDP ($5 billion) (Ironmonger, 1996; Canadian Federation of University Women, 2011). Care has been defined as the help needed by people with 'care needs' (child, elderly, sick, disabled), to be able to do what others can do unaided (Himmelweit, 2013; Eisler 2012). Unpaid care is typically done by women undertaking a second shift' after their paid work (Egan and Klausen, 1998), where this 'second shift' is equivalent to 584 hours annually (Canadian Federation of University Women, 2011; Creese and Strong-Boag, 2005). This unpaid labor imposes costs on women and affects the financial security of caregivers, which can strain the caregiving relationship (Keefe and Rajnovich, 2007). Traditional carers may provide care in anticipation of long-run reciprocity; which may backfire (Folbre 1995).

3. Volunteer farm labor as part of the caring economy

In several parts of the world there is a sector of the caring economy that involves volunteering on farms. One of these programs is called WWOOF. WWOOF originally stood for Willing Workers on Organic Farms but has recently been relabeled Worldwide Opportunities on Organic Farms (Terry 2014). This paper reviews data collected on the WWOOF program operating in North America and uses it to present evidence on the realities of the caring economy. WWOOF can be considered part of the care economy with a non-waged, low to high turnover labor strategy. Herron and Skinner (2011) consider farms in Ontario, Canada as spaces of care, but only farmwomen as the carers.

Many WWOOFers are young, backpack-toting volunteer tourists, either on a gap year or seeking "authentic" tourism-related experiences. WWOOFers and hosts barter 20 – 40 hours of labor per week for food and lodging (Mostafanezhad et al., 2015). Farm hosts can be house-rich if they are retired-empty-nesters. Hosts who still have children at home may offer bunk beds or external cabins or trailers.

The WWOOF organization is part of the non-profit sector and began in England in 1971 to connect urban travelers with organic farms in need of labor. The original name was Working Weekends on Organic Farms. Organic farms often have higher labor needs than conventional farms (Terry, 2014; Alvarez, 2012). WWOOF USA started in California in 2001 and WWOOF Canada has been operating since 1985. Each WWOOF host country has a website listing farm types, descriptions and tasks available and potential WWOOfers can search for a match in a location that they wish to visit. WWOOFers also have a home page

so that hosts can look at their profile to see what skills they have, their ages and places of origin and other details that the WWOOFer has provided.

The accommodation of most WWOOFers is within the home or in a host trailer, in a cabin or above the barn. WWOOFers may also bring their own trailers or tents. Most farms provide bicycles for volunteers to use on their day off; in a minority of cases hosts provide a car. On most host farms the WWOOFers eat at least one meal daily with the host farmer but there are cases in which the WWOOFers are given a separate food allocation (Terry 2014).

3.1 Types of WWOOF host

There are two main categories of WWOOF host. One host type wants to share knowledge of organic farming practices, learn from others on cultures, recipes and farming techniques, have entertaining and skilled temporary company, and also obtain some labor (Alvarez, 2012; Ord, 2010). Therefore, WWOOFers who want to have their own goat farm in the future would volunteer at a goat farm (Terry 2014; Alvarez 2012). A professor who teaches wine making would visit a winery to learn new wine making techniques. These training-intensive hosts would have many repeat visits. These training-type hosts reflect the original aims of the WWOOF movement (Alvarez, 2012; Deville et al., 2016).

The other type of host just wants the labor. Some members of this host type have been reported on blogs and to the WWOOF organization as feeding junk rather than organic food or limiting the food WWOOFers can eat, or having them work more than the 3 – 6 hours/day stipulated on the WWOOF site doing non-agricultural tasks like picking up rocks (Terry 2014; Bender 2010).

WWOOFers at labor-first host sites have to insist on days off and are not taken to see any part of the neighboring area. Some WWOOFers are put into unsafe places or situations (Alvarez, 2012). The host may be selling the farm and could be more disengaged from the situation than they otherwise would be. However, this reality contradicts the observations of Deville et al. (2016) that WWOOF represents an idealistic and ethical space potentially corrupted by tourists travelling cheaply for an authentic agri-tourism experience.

3.2 Types of WWOOFers

There are WWOOFers who are genuine tourists with jobs or school programs to go back to and others who may be future emigrants or escaping austerity (Ord, 2010). A minority of WWOOFers are travelling in their own country. Therefore, this is not a global supply chain, in which someone in the WWOOFer's home family has to take on the duties that the WWOOFer left behind (Fudge 2013). Many European volunteers in Canada are from Germany and France and have a one-year working visa. Others from countries without visa agreements pretend to be on holiday when they go through customs or border controls. This is possible because many WWOOF hosts have cupboards specifically for clothes and equipment for WWOOFers.

3.3 The place of WWOOF in the economy

Volunteer labor is a response to existing policies that have presumably increased agricultural efficiency, but which either prevent some farmers from providing living wages to permanent local staff or enable them to increase their profits by relying on a constant supply of temporary volunteers that they may or may not treat well depending on their own character

and moral standards (Hinze 2011; Sayer, 2015). WWOOFers provide a short-term coping strategy for organic farmers and they don't necessarily address their underlying problems (Mostafanszhad et al., 2015).

4. Willing Workers on Organic Farms (WWOOF) as part of the caring economy

An illustration of care shows it to be diamond-shaped, and provided by family/households, markets, the public sector and the non-profit sector (Razavi, 2007). 'Social Reproduction' is the social process and labour that goes into the daily and generational maintenance of the population (Fudge, 2013, p. 3): "Social Reproduction is typically organized by families in households and by the state through health, education, welfare and immigration policies", or by the market or voluntary organizations. In the organic farming world, social reproduction includes the provision of material resources, i.e. food for animals, horse blanket care, cleaning of animal housing, moving of animals to different pastures, and the training of newer workers. The tasks expected of WWOOFers sometimes include childcare and pet care. Cooking a meal from the home culture and kitchen/bathroom cleaning are commonly expected.

Choo and Petrick (2014) identify six classes of exchange relevant to the relationship exchanges in the care economy: (1) Love; (2) Status (low/high prestige, regard, esteem); (3) Information (advice, knowledge, opinions, or suggestions, theories, books, educational movies); (4) Currency (marginal in the WWOOF experience); (5) Goods - any tangible items that are exchanged - for WWOOFers this could be the temporary use of work clothes and equipment); and (6) Services - activities provided to or by an individual. WWOOFers who

get along well with their hosts stay for months or years, while others stay for two to three weeks (Ord, 2010). Mismatched volunteers and hosts may result in WWOOFers leaving after a few hours or days, as would be expected from the expectancy-disconfirmation theory in which the reality of a service does not meet expectations (Terry 2014; Choo and Petrick, 2014; Alvarez 2012). The reciprocity and positive feelings of successful social relationships are unmet since the social exchange is only partially fulfilled by poor WWOOF hosts, leading to dissatisfaction (Choo and Petrick, 2014, p. 374).

Terry (2014) refers to the WWOOF program as mitigating labor market failures, while not contributing to displacing local labor but provides no data to back this claim. A Canadian WOOF host told Ord (2010) that "WWOOF volunteers are volunteers. That makes them the most respectable, most highly motivated workers anyone could have". Some Canadian WWOOFers may choose not to report unsafe conditions to the various provincial workplace safety boards because of the temporary nature of their stay, whereas a local worker would (Alvarez, 2012). Bad barn designs or poor farm techniques do not need to be corrected or dealt with by the farmer and ergonomic practices do not have to be adopted because WWOOFers accept the temporary inconvenience, whereas a local worker might ask for changes.

WWOOFing can be considered part of agritourism in which farmers lower their costs rather than diversify their income (Choo and Petrick, 2014). Moscardo (2008) associates WWOOFing with the establishment stage of an organic farm in which profits are non-existent, justifying the need for no-cost labor; but this is not the case. The WWOOF Canada website shows farms that have been hosting for several years and Ord (2010) calculated an average of 3.6 hosting years from 270 farms. The monetary value of the volunteer labor can be calculated and also its impact on the farm economy by assuming that it substitutes for

paid labor. Fewer British Columbian farmers work full time on the farm (42%) than the Canadian average of 49%. The Canadian average of time worked off the farm (> 30 hours/week) is 25.6%, while in British Columbia it was 23.3% (Macey, 2013, p. 7). Two hundred and seventy of 470 farms in British Columbia employed 2,826 people; 726 were employed year round, 269 in greenhouse operations and 141 in dairy operations. Seasonal staff numbered 2100 with 1073 on fruit farms and 581 on vegetable farms.

The WWOOF program and others like it, allow farmers to provide the low cost food that policy makers have promised consumers, without over-burdening the farm family (Terry 2014). Farmers have already shifted to what Fudge (2013, p. 4) calls "treating care work as work that is socially necessary and a matter of obligation (in exchange for room and board) and initiative (on-the job learning and training) (see also Deville et al., 2016; Moscardo, 2008; Terry, 2014). WWOOFers match the definition of caring labor provided by Folbre (1995, p. 75) "labor undertaken out of affection or a sense of responsibility for others, with no expectation of immediate pecuniary reward", which is akin to the economics of generosity outlined by Cameron and Gibson-Graham (2003).

Ord (2010) was told by Canadian WWOOF hosts in response to a 2009 survey question that WWOOFers provided the "muscle power" and "strong backs" that they needed as older farmers; eight respondents wrote that projects could not have been completed without WWOOFers and ten claimed that WWOOFers were an alternative to hired labor. Of 268 respondents, 36.9% responded that they depended on WWOOF volunteer labor. Eleven respondents considered WWOOFers to be extended family and some visited them in their home countries (Ord, 2010).

Because there is no formal contract WWOOFers can leave any poor working environment if they have the confidence and the resources to do so. Those remaining will have more tasks to perform, but in some cases will have more living space or more privacy. More WWOOFers in some cases may lead to shorter hours, in other cases the host may want to have more tasks accomplished. The quality of the farm care provided depends on the knowledge and attitudes of the volunteer and the level of supervision they are given which agrees with the definition of care as having a dual nature consisting of relation and labor (Boris, 2014).

WWOOFers with the proper credentials are more likely to report poor conditions than others without working visas and non-reporting corresponds to what Razavi (2007) calls "docile workers". Some hosts don't care for their animals as much as organic farmers are supposed to do and others neglect to mention problems on their farms like water shortages or exaggerate the amount of time that WWOOFers can spend riding the horses that are being cared for, or their cooking ability, leading to conflicts (Terry 2014). The caring economy is therefore not fairer or more just because it is based on human relationships rather than market forces and the quality of the care does not necessarily depend on the quality of the relationship (Himmelweit, 2013; Fudge 2013; Barker, 2005). Folbre (1995, p. 75) also refutes this relationship argument by pointing out that in the traditional home care-based economy "a well-trained but ill-humored nurse may provide better medical care than a loving parent…"

WWOOFing succeeds in a society built on the trust and honesty that allow hosts to house strangers' month after month and year after year without suffering theft or breakages or other misfortunes - this is an example of the social capture of the benefits of a properly raised child (Folbre, 1994; Folbre 1995, p. 80). When different people care for animals every few weeks or months they become easier to handle for all. Razavi (2007, p. 2) claims that

care is "inextricably intertwined with other structures of inequality, especially race and social class". Some WWOOFers are the same race and social class or of a higher social class than their WWOOF hosts, but most are in an unequal relationship since they are strangers and some have the added disadvantage of lying about their tourist status. The farmer-hosts are the more powerful social group in this scenario.

5. Conclusion

The WWOOF program allows farmers to provide the low cost food that policy makers have promised consumers, by replacing farm labor and not over-burdening the farm family. WWOOFers match Folbre's definition of caring labor, i.e. labor undertaken out of affection or a sense of responsibility for WWOOF hosts, in exchange for room and board, rather than pecuniary reward (Folbre, 1995). This labor would have been provided by large farm families in the past and is akin to the economics of generosity outlined by Cameron and Gibson-Graham (2003).

However, there are flaws in the theoretical assumptions about the human care economy. Although care has a dual nature consisting of relation and labor (Boris, 2014), the quality of the care provided does not depend on the quality of the relationships between the parties involved. This was shown by Folbre's (1995) example of the ill-tempered nurse, and the situation of a motivated WWOOFer working in poor conditions.

Because some WWOOF hosts are not organic idealists, but may treat their animals and their WWOOFers poorly, WWOOF does not represent an idealistic and ethical space potentially

corrupted by tourists. WWOOFers sometimes leave bad situations after a few hours or days as would be expected from a poor fit.

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